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SUBJECT: CAMPAIGNING IN MANGISTAU OBLAST: INCREASED FAIRNESS, BUT
NUR OTAN STILL DOMINATES

REF: Astana 1906

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On August 8-10, Poloff and Pol FSN traveled to Aktau in Mangistau Oblast (western Kazakhstan) to meet with political party representatives and NGOs in advance of the August 18 elections. In general, the Aktau political scene reflects trends apparent throughout the country, with opposition parties facing some roadblocks in their campaign and fearing fraud on election day, while Nur Otan dominates advertising space and conducts the most active and organized campaign. Despite the roadblocks, the opposition acknowledged that the situation is better than in the two previous elections, and most interlocutors claimed that there was a high degree of public interest in the elections. End summary.

EMBASSY REACHES OUT TO AKTAU PARTIES, CIVIL SOCIETY

¶2. (SBU) On August 8-10, Poloff and Pol FSN traveled to the far west of Kazakhstan, to the city of Aktau on the Caspian Sea. During the trip, Poloff met with representatives of Ak Zhol, the National Social Democratic Party (NSDP), and Nur Otan to discuss the progress of the campaign in the region. In addition, Poloff discussed the campaign with representatives of the Republican Network of Independent Monitors, the Kazakhstan International Human Rights Bureau, a variety of NGOs, and a pastor from the Living Word Pentecostal Church. Poloff also arranged a meeting with a representative from the oblast akim's office, but the representative failed to appear for the meeting. During his travels throughout the city, Poloff observed multiple Nur Otan billboards or billboards featuring President Nazarbayev, and numerous smaller Nur Otan signs on a wide variety of public places, including in the windows of some city buses. Poloff saw virtually no signs or advertisements from other parties.

AK ZHOL

¶3. (U) Poloff met with local Ak Zhol leader Agzam Zhumsakov in Ak Zhol's headquarters, a small office in a Soviet-era apartment building. Zhumsakov reported that Ak Zhol did very well in Mangistau Oblast in the 2004 parliamentary elections, and they were hoping to repeat the result this year. He said that the local campaign has "slowed down" in recent days, after hosting visits from several of their national leaders. He said the party expects one or two more of its national leaders to appear in Aktau before the election, and will spend some time campaigning in the regions and placing local media advertisements.

14. (SBU) Zhumsakov and two or three fellow activists spent much of the conversation complaining about election law violations and unfair tactics that occurred during previous elections. When asked about the conduct of the campaign during the current election, Zhumsakov said that the city has failed to respond to their request to place billboards in the city, essentially denying them the right to do so. He also claimed that local authorities have been waging a "campaign of intimidation" for the last three months, collecting employee lists and pressuring employers to force their employees to vote for Nur Otan. Zhumsakov reported that in a few cases local officials denied the party access to facilities for meetings. He also predicted cheating on election day, and complained of a lack of opposition representatives on election commissions. (Reftel)

15. (SBU) When pressed, Zhumsakov said that Ak Zhol has not had a problem thus far placing media advertisements, handing out campaign literature, or getting local television coverage. (Note: All of Ak Zhol's campaign literature was printed in the Kazakh language only, though approximately 18% of the local population is ethnic Russian, and presumably does not speak Kazakh. End note.) He said that overall, the situation has improved somewhat from the 2004 and 2005 campaigns, though he predicted a lot could still happen between now and election day. Zhumsakov said that local citizens are well aware of the coming election, but that voters are tired of elections, as they just had a presidential election in December 2005. He stated that citizens here generally do not trust the election process or expect elections to bring any real changes to their lives. (Comment: Overall, Poloff was not impressed by Ak Zhol's local operation; Zhumsakov and some of his fellow activists were far more interested in complaining about past violations and relatively minor violations this year, and did not appear to have a very robust campaign operation or concrete plans for the final seven days of the campaign. End comment.)

NATIONAL SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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16. (SBU) The local NSDP office was also housed in a small office in a Soviet-era apartment complex, not far from the Ak Zhol headquarters. Local NSDP leader Adil Zhurmaly-uly echoed some of the same concerns as Zhumsakov, noting that the city has obstructed or delayed several of their requests for meeting facilities and for the three billboards they want to place within the city. He also said that many sympathetic business owners refused to give them permission to place signs on their property, citing a fear of reprisals from local authorities. In addition, Zhurmaly-uly expressed serious concerns about potential fraud on election day, reminding Poloff that opposition representatives received very few seats on the election commissions in Mangistau Oblast. (Reftel) He said that the local party intends to utilize the recently added provision to the election law which allows parties to send non-voting representatives to observe the work of election commissions on election day.

17. (SBU) Zhurmaly-uly said that overall, it's been easier for his party to campaign this year than in previous years, and he credited this improvement to the success of the opposition's work over the last several years. In the final seven days of the campaign, the party intends to send motorcades to villages to discuss the party's platform, and to set up booths at important population points to distribute literature. He said that his party will not be able to campaign as openly as Nur Otan, because many of their supporters are intimidated. He predicted that without the intimidation factor, NSDP would be able to get 60-65% of the vote. Finally, he noted that the party had little time to prepare for the campaign, because they were caught off guard by the early election date. (Comment: Though the local NSDP party appeared to have more concrete and effective plans for the remainder of the campaign than did Ak Zhol, the operation as a whole did not appear particularly energetic, and the campaign headquarters was filled with NSDP campaign materials, signs, and T-shirts that had not been distributed a week out from election day. End comment.)

NUR OTAN

¶8. (U) Poloff met with local Nur Otan chief of staff Edil Jamburshin at Nur Otan's oblast party headquarters in a relatively modern office building. Visible down the street was a brand-new, five story office building with the Nur Otan name prominently displayed; Jamburshin explained that the party was in the process of moving to the new facility. Jamburshin presented in detail the party's campaign plan, a genuine grassroots effort which included mini-rallies in individual neighborhoods, door-to-door campaigning, telephone campaigning, and posting signs throughout the oblast. He also said that the party conducted a number of larger receptions to introduce party candidates to the voters. On August 12, the party is planning a disco party for local youth. He said that the party was committed to campaigning honestly and legally, because the party wants to win respect and does not want future criticism of its campaign efforts.

¶9. (SBU) Jamburshin claimed that voter interest in the election is very high, though he admitted that turnout may be relatively low given that the election is taking place during vacation season. Based on his interactions with voters during the campaign, he believes that the quality of schools, roads, and other infrastructure are the most important issues on the minds of voters, followed by ecological issues and the lack of affordable housing. (Comment: Nur Otan's financial and institutional advantages were clearly apparent, as evidenced by the breadth and depth of their campaign effort. In addition to these advantages, the party seemed far more knowledgeable about and focused on the mechanics of organizing a campaign and getting out the vote. End comment.)

CIVIL SOCIETY

¶10. (U) Poloff also met with a number of civil society interlocutors in order to discuss the election in Mangistau Oblast. Aleksandr Mukha, director of the Mangistau Oblast branch of the Kazakhstan International Human Rights Bureau, agreed that most of the electorate was aware of the coming election, but many were still undecided. He said that he observed a few violations, but said both the NSDP and Ak Zhol have been able to conduct rallies without serious hindrance. He also recently traveled in several rural areas, and noted that appropriate campaign information was displayed at the rural polling stations he visited, though he noted that in general there was very little campaign activity by any party in the rural regions.
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¶11. (SBU) Kirill Osin, director of the regional Republican Network of Independent Monitors branch, was heavily engaged in training election monitors and preparing for the election. He shared the view that voters were well aware of the coming election, and felt that voter attitudes are generally positive. Osin himself was not optimistic that the vote counting process would be any better than in the past. Osin also expressed disappointment in the weakness of the opposition parties, stating that they had failed to unite and present a stronger campaign against Nur Otan; instead, they were spending far too much time fighting and arguing with each other. (Note: The US government is providing financial support to the Network's election monitoring efforts. End note.)

¶12. (SBU) During the visit, the president of the local Civic Alliance NGO organized a roundtable discussion with several local NGOs, including NGOs devoted to environmental issues, disabled people, youth development, and rural business/farm development. (Note: The Civic Alliance is an NGO closely affiliated with the government, and seeks to organize local NGOs and seek government cooperation with civil society. End note.) The NGO representatives consistently stated that the local population was very aware of the coming election, even in rural areas, and that people were actively comparing the various party platforms, etc. Only one NGO leader disagreed, saying that people were tired of elections, and didn't

know the candidates or party platforms. Poloff met separately with Andrey Yatluk, the pastor of the Living Word Pentecostal Church, a registered 200-member church in Aktau. Yatluk reported that his congregation was very engaged in the election, and that all of the church members intended to vote.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) Comment: The opposition parties in Aktau are fighting an uphill battle against the formidable Nur Otan operation, and face a number of unfair or historic institutional disadvantages typical of the scene nationwide. These factors, combined with the popularity of President Nazarbayev, will play a role in the final result, even assuming a fair vote count. However, the opposition's unimpressive local campaigns will also impact the result. The principal opposition parties both acknowledged they have more freedom to campaign this year, but they do not appear to have taken full advantage of this improvement by conducting vigorous and energetic campaigns. The reports of high voter interest in the elections are inconsistent with Post's observations elsewhere, and may reflect the fact that the interlocutors are active members of civil society and do not represent an average cross-section of local citizens. End comment.